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ABSTRACT

The incorporation of age- and language-appropriate thematic literature into the early childhood curriculum can stimulate content-based academic learning for English language learners (ELLs). This systematic approach is particularly beneficial to young ELLs ages 3 through 8, because it provides background knowledge and cultural information along with opportunities to hear, speak, and interact with carefully crafted language in thematic and story contexts. It also develops literacy in an engaging and playful context. For example, a well-chosen picture book can provide a meaningful focus for developing reading skills such as vocabulary and comprehension, as well as an awareness of sounds and sound-letter relationships. While this careful introduction to reading is important for all children in Grades preK-3, it is critical for the growing population of young ELLs. Almost half (47%) of the K-12 ELL school population reported by grade (1999-2000) is enrolled in Grades K-3, representing about 1.3 million children. Many of these children are interacting socially beyond the home and family for the first time, hearing extensive English, being exposed to books and read aloud to, and functioning as part of a learning community. This digest provides early childhood educators with book selection criteria, literature-based teaching strategies, curricular topics, and book lists for representative topics appropriate for use with ELLs in early childhood settings. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/VWL)

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Thematic Literature and Curriculum for English Language Learners in Early Childhood Education

BETTY ANSIN SMALLWOOD, CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

The incorporation of age- and language-appropriate thematic literature into the early childhood curriculum can stimulate content-based academic learning for English language learners (ELLs). This systematic approach is particularly beneficial to young ELLs ages 3 through 8 because it provides background knowledge and cultural information along with opportunities to hear, speak, and interact with carefully crafted language in thematic and story contexts. It also develops literacy in an engaging and playful context (Ghosn, 2002). For example, a well-chosen picture book can provide a meaningful focus for developing reading skills such as vocabulary and comprehension, as well as an awareness of sounds and sound-letter relationships (Smallwood, 1998). While this careful introduction to reading is important for all children in Grades preK-3 (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), it is critical for the growing population of young ELLs. Almost half (47%) of the K-12 ELL school population reported by grade (1999-2000) is enrolled in Grades K-3, representing about 1.3 million children (Kindler, 2002). Many of these children are interacting socially beyond the home and family for the first time, hearing extensive English, being exposed to books and read aloud to, and functioning as part of a learning community.

This digest provides early childhood educators with book selection criteria, literature-based teaching strategies, curricular topics, and book lists for representative topics appropriate for use with ELLs in early childhood settings.

Book Selection Criteria

Book selection is critical because not all books are equally effective with ELLs (Smallwood, 1991; Tabors, 1997). Most book lists do not carefully weigh the particular learning needs of ELLs, and even fewer address young ELLs. Teachers should consider the following questions when evaluating a book's appropriateness for this population:

- Does the book help meet curricular objectives or enhance the thematic units being studied? Dickson's (2001) research confirms that preschool teachers often select stories that are connected to classroom themes. This connection is especially important for ELLs, who benefit from reinforcement of a topic.
- Is the book's content appropriate to the children's age and intellectual level? Books should be developmentally and content appropriate for young ELLs, many of whom have had limited exposure to books or to English.
- Does the book use language that is at or slightly above the level of the learners? Both the amount of text and the level of complexity should be considered, and the level of grammatical difficulty should increase in alignment with the students' level of aural comprehension.
- Does the book contain repeated, predictable language patterns? Such patterns include rhyming and repetition of sounds, words, refrains, or entire sentences.
- Are there clear illustrations that help tell the story? Teachers depend on pictures to explain new vocabulary and to hold the attention of the young learners. Photographs can capture hard-to-explain emotions, such as curiosity and excitement. When the teacher and student do not share a language, illustrations are often the most critical book selection criterion.
- Will the book add to the collection of bilingual and multicultural books in the classroom that represent the diverse languages and cultures of the children? Hearing their native language or about their home culture boosts ELLs' self-esteem and provides opportunities for enhancing literacy skills in both the native language and English.

Teaching Strategies

Many effective strategies for reading aloud with young children apply to ELLs (e.g., predicting from the book cover before reading, pointing to illustrations during reading, checking for comprehension upon completion). The strategies suggested below are especially useful for developing oral language and beginning literacy with students learning English as an additional language (Smallwood, 1998).

Prereading. Before reading a story aloud, preview the story, highlight key vocabulary, and make a clear connection to the curriculum topic being studied. Encourage students to express key words or concepts in their native language, using a bilingual staff member, parent, or other student, if available, to help interpret. Vocabulary can be introduced and later reinforced through a picture dictionary organized by topics (e.g., *The Oxford Picture Dictionary for Kids*, Keyes, 1998; Oxford University Press). If the students are able, have them share related background experiences from their home or culture, in either their native language or English. Pose a specific listening objective to help the children focus, such as asking them to think about three feelings described in the book *Everybody Has Feelings* (Avery, 1992; Open Hand).

Reading Aloud. Read slowly and clearly with a lot of dramatic expression. Plan fairly short read-aloud sessions; 10 minutes of listening is about all that students new to a language can productively absorb. Allow young children to hold and quietly play with something, such as a ball or doll, to help focus their attention, if necessary. If there is an aide or other adult available during book reading time, seat them near ELLs to help them remain focused or to quietly reinforce the story. If a book is beyond the students' language, content, or developmental level but meets other selection criteria, edit the story as you read or retell it through the pictures. For example, simplify *I'm New Here* (Howlett, 1993; Houghton Mifflin), which describes in first-person narrative and photos the first school experiences and emotions of a 9-year-old girl from El Salvador. Pause regularly to do an informal check of students' comprehension and to allow them to discuss the pictures or story, while not losing track of the reading focus.

Discussion, Review, and Extension Activities. Encourage ELLs to talk about the story by having them point out their favorite parts, in English or their home language (if an aide or parent is available to interpret). After a comprehension check, follow with some literacy skill development. For example, with *Miss Mary Mack* (Westcott, 1998; Little, Brown), children repeat by chanting the three initial *m* sounds in the title and three rhyming words—*Mack, back,* and *black*—that practice initial sounds and a difficult-to-pronounce final blend. This is a natural, contextualized way to develop an awareness of different speech sounds. ELLs also need followup time to reinforce the connection between the book and the curricular theme. For example, after reading aloud *Bread, Bread, Bread* (Morris, 1989; Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard), with its photographs of delicious bread from around the world, bring in different kinds of bread for the children to experi-

ence and have them draw, label, and write a description of their favorite. Other possible reinforcement activities include making a graph that tallies students' favorite breads, making a collage of bread pictures, or taking a class field trip to a bakery.

Arrange for ELLs to listen to the book again, ideally in a smaller group, and provide them with additional opportunities to interact with and learn the vocabulary, structures, and information. Encourage them to retell the story to others and to take the book home, if permitted. If there is a bilingual edition of the book, invite a bilingual staff member or parent to read it and make it available for the families. Another way to provide repeated exposure to a book is for the teacher or parent volunteer to record it on tape and put it in the listening center along with the book.

Curriculum Topics

Traditional curricular topics for early childhood education and also for ESL have emphasized basic interpersonal communicative skills, such as the ability to talk about food, family, and holidays. Increasingly, however, topics are also focused on developing more cognitively demanding academic language in the content areas. For example, in science, early childhood units may be developed on the food pyramid, dinosaurs, insects, or simple machines. In social studies, countries and cultures represented by students in the class can be introduced, "coming to America" stories can be discussed, and cultural diversity of the neighborhood can be celebrated. Most early childhood education curricula focus on both basic communication skills and the more complex language needed for academic contexts. This dual focus is very helpful for ELLs, who need to become proficient in both social and academic language.

There are resources available to help teachers develop thematic units in elementary (Meinbach, Rothlein, & Fredericks, 1995) and early childhood settings (Carroll & Kear, 1993) with guidelines, sample topics, and activities, but neither of these addresses the specific needs of ELLs. "Everything ESL" (www.everythingesl.net), a Web site devoted to K-12 ESL, offers lesson plans on content-based themes for the elementary grades.

The multicultural literature recommendations for early childhood curricular topics listed below also meet our selection criteria for ELLs in these grades. These suggestions are derived from annotated book lists compiled for monthly themes of the pre-K curriculum in Prince George's County Public Schools, MD (Smallwood, 2000).

Learning About School

Ashley, B. (1995). *Cleversticks*. New York: Random House.

Baer, E. (1990). *This is the way we go to school. A book about children around the world*. New York: Scholastic.

Mitchell, D. (1997). *Schools around the world*. Austin, TX: Steck-Vaughn.

Morris, A. (1999). *Teamwork*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

All About Me and You!

Fox, M. (1997). *Whoever you are*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Gordon, G. (1993). *My two worlds*. New York: Clarion.

Raschha, C. (1993). *Yo! Yes?* New York: Orchard.

Roe, E. (1991). *Con my hermano/With my brother*. New York: Bradbury.

Getting to Know Mexico and Spanish

Grejniec, M. (1993). *Buenos dias. Buenos noches*. New York: North-South.

Orozco, J-L. (1997). *Diez deditos. Ten little fingers and other play rhymes and action songs from Latin America*. New York: Dutton.

Soto, G. (1993). *Too many tamales*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Van Laan, N. (1996). *La boda. A Mexican wedding celebration*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Enjoying Snow Around the World

Chapman, C. (1994). *Snow on snow on snow*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Good, M. (1995). *Reuben and the blizzard*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

Lee, H. V. (1995). *In the snow*. New York: Holt.

Shulevitz, U. (1998). *Snow*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Siddals, M. K. (1998). *Millions of snowflakes*. New York: Clarion.

Celebrating Chinese New Year

Chinn, K. (1995). *Sam and the lucky money*. New York: Lee & Low.

Demi. (1997). *Happy New Year. Kung-His Fa-Ts'ai*. New York: Crown.

Low, W. (1997). *Chinatown*. New York: Holt.

Waters, K., & Slovenz-Low, M. (1990). *Lion dancer. Ernie Wan's Chinese New Year*. New York: Scholastic.

Conclusion

Literature-based, thematic, and content-based approaches have a strong research base and have been used widely in elementary and middle school mainstream, ESL, and foreign language programs (Haas, 2000). These approaches are now becoming equally important for early childhood education to prepare students for the demands of academics and testing. With authentic literature, teachers are helping to build emotional, social, and intellectual responses to the natural language of engaging stories linked with attractive illustrations.

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Meinbach, A. M., Rothlein, L., & Fredericks, A. D. (1995). *The complete guide to thematic units: Creating the integrated curriculum*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

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